

Report of Committee on Free Pews

May 5th, 1919

The Diocese of Pennsylvania

THE CHURCH HOUSE
1129 WALNUT STREET
PHILADELPHIA

May 10th, 1919.

I commend the attached report on "Free Pews" to the consideration of the Rectors and Vestrymen of the Parishes in which the rented pew system exists, believing that from your suggestions, criticisms, and co-operation some constructive action will be taken which will be of material assistance in freeing all the Churches in the Diocese.

Philip M. Runkel

THE DIOCESE OF PENNSYLVANIA

COMMITTEE ON FREE PEWS
THE CHURCH HOUSE
1129 WALNUT STREET

Philadelphia, May 5th, 1919.

DUTY OF THE COMMITTEE

The undersigned Committee on Free Pews was appointed by the Bishop to consider and give practical effect to the recommendation of the Laymen's Temporary Advisory Committee "that in all Churches of the Diocese all pews or sittings should be made free at the earliest opportunity."

THE SITUATION

The Protestant Episcopal Church is frequently regarded as having in general use rented pews or sittings which are barriers to free worship, and participation in its services and sacraments. This system results in making people regard our Parish Churches as exclusive and snobbish, where strangers and poor people are not welcomed. For our Diocese the facts are that in April, 1918, not more than 58 out of 187 Parishes and Missions reporting to the General Convention, used the pew renting system. Only 163 Parishes and Missions out of said total of 187 made financial reports for that issue of the Diocesan Journal. The 58 Parishes derived from pew rents only 16½ per cent of their total annual receipts for all purposes. The pew rents so reported were equal to only 10 per cent of the total receipts for all purposes of the 163 Parishes and Missions, which made financial reports.

While the pew renting Churches are relatively few in number, and the total annual pew rents is small compared to the total income of the Diocese, or to their own total annual income, yet these 58 Churches are largely City Churches, having about 50 per cent of the total communicants in the Diocese, and exercise a very wide sphere of influence. Therefore, the pew renting system is regarded as not only quite prevalent, but very essential for financial support. It has been suggested that the possession of endowments and investments affords an assurance of a free Church, but an exami-

nation of the chief City Churches shows that those with large investments and endowments also retain the pew renting system. The facts of the situation indicate that it is quite possible to abolish the system when our people make up their minds to take that action, and give each Parish the reasonable support its work deserves.

DISADVANTAGES OF PEW RENTS

Pew and sitting holders, while legally required to provide but a small part of the total annual Parish revenues, are generally regarded as the owners of the Church, who elect its Vestrymen and dictate its policy, instead of general participation by all the Congregation.

The Committee recognizes that rented pews and sittings have been used for founding, and systematically aiding, many of our Churches, and providing a regular place therein for persons paying for the privilege. It should be said to the credit of the pewholders that in addition they are often most generous supporters of the Church at large and its Missions, and they are not, as a rule, responsible for the establishment of the pew renting system. The pew renting system has had the undesirable effects of keeping some people and their families out of the Church, and discouraging persons of limited means, and strangers, from regular Church attendance. Their personal service might have been exceedingly helpful to the Parish, and in addition they could give some financial support, although they could not also afford to pay pew rents.

Experience has proven that residents and strangers will not continue coming to a Church where they must depend upon the courtesy or favor of others to provide a pew to worship God. Therefore, a number of rented seats will be found unoccupied during services, and many people, instead of being interested in their own Parish, are attracted to free Churches, or else become totally indifferent. Nor does the Church, which labels some portion of its edifice "free" and the remainder "rented," meet the situation, as it emphasizes clearly a class or a moneyed distinction between the people of the same Parish.

PEW RENTING SYSTEM OUT OF DATE

Notwithstanding any benefits of the pew renting system in the past, it is no longer of sufficient importance financially to justify its retention, if the devotion of our members is as great as we estimate it to be. Further, the growth of population, and the larger field of service in the Church, has made the pew renting system out of touch with present conditions and ideals. That system cannot be in full accord either with the underlying

freedom of worship taught by Christ and his Apostles, or with the individual responsibility of our Christian profession. If any Parish feels that the pew renting system is legally essential to protect its property, other means can be found to accomplish that object.

PRESENT CONDITIONS DEMAND A CHANGE

Regarding our Diocese as a whole, we find we are not attracting the people to the Churches, and many of those who are nominally members are performing no active work in its behalf, and assuming no financial responsibility for its support. This situation, we believe, would be materially improved by abolishing the restrictive pew renting system, and giving men, women and children of every Parish, and strangers as well, a sense of ownership in God's house, and responsibility for personal service and support.

The War awakened our sense of National and individual danger, and comradeship, sacrifice and the levelling of religious differences was the result. Our Diocese has just made a universal and successful campaign for prayer, service and giving. With both of these movements it is consistent to ask for the termination of the pew renting system. Throughout the World there is a great unsettling of minds and actions of men and women, and destructive selfishness and anarchy are endeavoring to destroy the Church and the teachings and practices of its Founder, our Lord Jesus Christ, and His followers. We believe the time is ripe, even at considerable sacrifice, to offer the greatest sense of freedom in worship and service in each of our Parishes, to stir the conscience of men and women to the benefits of the Church, and offset the influence of those who have no regard for life, property or religion. In this way we can help to stabilize and strengthen the beliefs of men and women, and incite them to courageously stand for law, order and religion.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We are convinced that the time has come to ascertain whether the 58 Parishes really desire to continue the pew renting system. We believe that our people as a whole do not desire any exclusive rented privilege in the Church buildings which their fellow worshippers cannot equally share.

We, therefore, recommend that Rectors and Vestrymen of these Parishes ascertain the views of their people regarding the free pew plan. A trial of free pews can be made without disrupting any sound system of existing Church finance or worship.

If the Rector and Vestry are agreed to test the matter, let them ask the

pew and sitting holders if they will pledge themselves to continue paying an amount equal to their pew rents, or sittings, in addition to their regular offerings; and relinquish for general use any pew or sitting now assigned to them. In short, are they willing to give the Parish as much support as heretofore, and in addition unselfishly throw open the pews to any worshipper? In old Parishes where it seems impossible at present to change the Charter, then let the individuals pay their customary pew rents, but voluntarily agree that no particular pews or sittings be assigned to them, but be left open to all worshippers. Let this be adopted as a continuing Parish policy.

CO-OPERATIVE SUPPORT OF THE PARISH

In any of these cases when a majority of the pewholders are willing to consent, do not limit the question of Parish support to them, but ask all Parishioners how much each is willing to subscribe so that the free pew system may be adopted, in which all of them will share.

Give all of them an opportunity to use the weekly duplex envelope system, or to pay subscriptions in advance monthly, quarterly, or semi-annually. A Parish requires a systematic and dependable system for support, and there is just as much need for it to have working capital paid in advance as any other undertaking. Based on experience elsewhere, it will give the whole Congregation a chance to assist the Vestry and the Rector in raising funds, and broaden their interest in the Parish.

We respectfully ask experienced Vestrymen and Rectors not to prejudge the situation but give the system outlined above a fair trial, and let the people have a full chance to accept the responsibility of deciding the question. Make a strong appeal for each member to undertake a fair share of the support and service of his or her Church. Act with faith and courage. Neither the Nation itself nor the Red Cross could sell sufficient bonds or obtain personal service except by a well-organized and enthusiastic canvass. So each Parish must use the efforts of not only its Vestrymen but all men and women in the Congregation to produce a well-supported, active and useful Church.

Over 70 per cent of the Parishes and Missions in the Diocese are already free. That percentage is below those of the other Dioceses in our State. The Committee believes the time has come to realize the vision of freedom and comradeship in worship and service, so that our Churches will not only be known, but used, as free and open "houses of prayer for all people." This movement in which the 58 Parishes are especially requested to engage, is dictated from a sense of responsibility to the great Head of our

Church, and an unselfish desire to spread its benefits to every worshipper, whether friend or stranger.

This Committee will to the best of its ability, answer inquiries, provide speakers, and give such further suggestions as Parishes may desire regarding free pews and the amendments of Charters where essential. The Committee requests Rectors and Vestries of Parishes in which the pew system prevails to give such publicity to this report in their respective Parishes as will at least result in having "Free Pews" fully discussed. The Committee realizes that the problem is different in almost every Parish, and, therefore, will welcome criticisms and suggestions, which may be addressed to any members of the undersigned Committee.

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